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ABSTRACT

By not considering the meaning of art, schools easily find a superficial niche for the arts in the curriculum. Thus, art education is usually viewed as a diversion designed for recreation or as a "carrot" to attract students to the larger curriculum. Its peripheral position is revealed by the miniscule amount of time allotted it, the lack of goals set for it, and, ironically, by the fact that art is seen only as a plus--a little added glitter--and not as a subject addressing deep or controversial issues. However art is not just about hearts and flowers; it is also about anger and despair. It exists in a social and moral context. The arts curriculum, therefore, should consist not only of creating, performing, and observing art; it should also include opportunities for reflection and for expanding consciousness beyond one's self and one's art into the larger world. This approach, however, will make it more difficult to fit art into the curriculum because it challenges the concept of art as something separate and recreational. Yet, until art education addresses these issues, it will remain a trivial part of the curriculum. (IS)

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The Social/Moral Context of the Arts Curriculum: A Critique

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (69th, Chicago, IL, March 31-April 4, 1985).

The arts have traditionally been viewed as a pleasant but not particularly valuable addition to the school curriculum, rather harmless as long as the "real" work is accomplished first. As an arts educator, I have found that school administrators and classroom teachers seem very pleased to offer arts experiences for their children, as long as they do not conflict with what is considered more essential learning. As Eisner (1976) notes, and most arts educators could confirm, arts classes are usually relegated to the times of the day and the week when children are most fatigued, and need a little rest and relaxation. Arts classes seem appreciated in the same way that art is viewed in general--as something pretty to hang on the walls, but not part of the basic structure.

Why are the arts so consistently treated as only a trivial ornament in education? Historically, it is rather easy to see how the importance of the arts has been limited by our Puritan heritage and by the need to tame the American wilderness (The Arts, Education and Americans Panel, 1977). But we are no longer attempting to tame a wilderness, and the Puritan work ethic is no longer as strong as it once was. My concern in this paper is to understand some of the reasons that the arts have remained insignificant in education, and how we as arts educators may be contributing to the problem. Following a review of some of the major justifications for the arts in education, I will explore hidden dangers of some common ways

of thinking about the relationship between arts education and society, and suggest a vision through which the arts might become more significant.

In looking at the literature, it would appear that arts education has been connected to practically every possible good known to humankind, and used to support every known educational goal. While I will not attempt here a comprehensive review of this literature, I will indicate some notable examples.

Eisner (1972) presents a framework for looking at these claims; he points out that there are two major arguments for the arts in education, which he refers to as the contextualist and the essentialist views. The contextualist begins with determining needs of the child, community, and nation. Within this argument, the major justifications for art education are as preparation for use of leisure time, contribution to mental health (through self expression), development of creative ability, development of understanding of academic concepts, and improvement of coordination. While Eisner does not argue that art education accomplishes these goals, he finds them insufficient to justify art education. Rather, he ascribes to the essentialist position--that art makes unique contribution to a person's experience with and understanding of the world. Under this argument, he justifies art education in that art provides a sense of the visionary in human experience, activates our sensibilities and capacity to respond, allows us to see both

the ordinary and the extraordinary with a fresh vision, helps us find meaning in our daily experience, generates cohesiveness among people, and enlarges our consciousness. Eisner argues that it is important to take a subject centered, essentialist approach to art curriculum, rather than a society centered view, but bases this preference on the fact that the former is a stronger argument, stating that "if it [art] is justified in educational practice . . . on grounds that are not unique to art, it has no more claim to educational support than any other field that claims to make the same contributions" (1972, p. 63).

The work of Herbert Read has frequently been cited in support for arts in education, and he also makes an essentialist argument. Read (1958) argued that consciousness, intelligence, and judgment are based upon the aesthetic sense, and since these capacities are central to education, then art should be the basis of education. It should be noted, however, that Read was not referring just to visual arts, drama, dance, and music education, separate subjects to be taught, but to art as a way to teach any subject, concerned with apprehension and understanding of wholes and relationships.

Dewey (1934) is another major source for support of arts in education. Dewey found art most significant in helping us feel more fully alive, providing an experience of wholeness that counters the otherwise humdrum nature of life. Dewey

also saw a connection between art and morality, with imagination being the common link. He wrote

> Imagination is the chief instrument of the good . . . a person's ideas and treatment of his fellows are dependent upon his power to put himself imaginatively into their place. (p. 348)

Dewey is not alone in pointing out the possibility of a relationship between art education and moral education. Kupfer (1978) noted that aesthetic experiences contribute to moral instruction, because relationships found in aesthetic objects serve as a model for moral relationships; the relationship of parts to whole in an aesthetic object is akin to the relationship of community. Further, he finds that aesthetic experience gives us the opportunity to develop mental habits and perspectives necessary to the realization of community: "We are given practice in activity involving discrimination, economy, venture, and integration, and are induced to respond to others as free responsive beings" (p. 22).

Newman (1980) found further congruence between aesthetic sensibility and moral education, suggesting that the aesthetic is not only instrumental to the process of moral development, but is an essential dimension of the moral. Ross (1981) extended Newman's ideas further, noting that

> aesthetic experience--and hence aesthetic education--is centered upon our capacity to act and perceive with love: love of life, of living, of lives--our own and the lives of others known and unknown to us. (p. 157)

In a 1977 publication, a national panel chaired by David Rockefeller, Jr. reported results of their research into the significance of the arts in American education. Based upon data collected from national and state organizations and specific school sites, they reaffirmed that

> The arts are a function of life itself, and the process of making art--both creative and recreative--can give insight to all other areas of learning. The arts help people understand themselves in historical, cultural, and aesthetic terms; they provide people with broader choices about their environment and influence the way they do their work and live their lives. Since artistic expression is also truly basic to the individual's intellectual development, it must be included as a component of all education. (The Arts, Education and Americans Panel, 1977, p. 248)

Brandwein (1981) has written that the arts and humanities support the basic values of civilization--truth, beauty, justice, love, and faith--and even developed a six-level structure for curriculum through which studies in art, movement and dance, play and drama, music, and language further these values.

Most recently, there has been some prominent support for the arts in education. As a statement from the Working Group on the Arts in Higher Education (1984) indicated, even the authoritative voices of the National Commission on Excellence in Education and the College Entrance Examination

Board have published their support for the arts. The National Commission noted that a school curriculum should include the arts along with such areas as language development, science, and social studies in the curriculum of the first eight years, to foster an enthusiasm for learning and the development of the individual's gifts and talents. The College Board stated that

> The arts . . . challenge and extend human experience. They provide means of expression that go beyond ordinary speaking and writing. They can express intimate thoughts and feelings. They are a unique record of diverse cultures and how these cultures have developed over time. They provide distinctive ways of understanding human beings and nature. The arts are creative modes by which all people can enrich their lives both by self-expression and response to the expressions of others. (College Entrance Examination Board, cited in Working Group on the Arts in Higher Education, 1984, p. 1)

It would be easy to go on and on citing literature that is supportive of arts education, both the contextualist and the essentialist views. In looking to practice, it appears that arts education has accommodated to a wide variety of goals and values in education. The arts have been enlisted as a tool for teaching various academic skills and concepts; in fact, this was indicated as one of four major purposes for the Dance Component of the Artist-in-Schools program (National

Endowment for the Arts, 1979). When career education became popular, data on the availability of jobs in arts and arts related fields was gathered in support of arts training programs. My own field of dance has been enlisted in support of a national emphasis on physical fitness, in the process losing its integrity as an art form to become a means for exercise.

It appears that we cannot credit the lack of significance of the arts in education to the failure of arts educators to be flexible, nor to the absence of support in the literature. However, I find it interesting that there is remarkably little literature which seriously questions the value of the arts or suggests their dangers if not presented well. Examples of such criticism in my own field (Brady, 1982; Gordon, 1983; Vincent, 1979) are notable not only in their uniqueness, but because they refer to professional training schools rather than to broader educational settings. While there are proposals of how arts education should be done, there is little to suggest the possibility that negative consequences might ensue if it is not done well. While some kinds of art may be more educative than others, any art is assumed to be better than no art at all.

There seem to be two logical reasons that the literature in arts education does not present a more critical perspective. One, most obviously, has been the need to market the arts,

particularly in times of limited financial resources. Arts educators seem continuously to be facing the need to justify their existence, but more so when budgets are decreasing. In trying to convince School Boards and administrators of the value of the arts, arts educators have focused much more on enumerating positive values than on critical review of theory and practice.

In exploring my own interest in the social context of arts education, I find a more complex reason for absence of much critical literature. The nature of the aesthetic experience involved in doing art is such that one is aware only of the aesthetic object and one's relationship with it. The experience itself is so powerful that it is difficult to remain simultaneously aware of the social context in which the art occurs. For example, if I attend a symphony concert and become aesthetically engaged with the music, I will likely not notice that 98% of the musicians and audience members are white. In fact, if I do notice it, it may very well prohibit an aesthetic experience with the music. Similarly, if I attend a ballet concert and begin to question how many dancers suffer from anorexia nervosa, it will be difficult for me to perceive the dance itself aesthetically. As Rader and Jessup (1976) note, in aesthetic perception "the beholder disattends to the purely external relations of the object and attends to its internal qualities and its internal relations" (p. 74). The same is true in the process of creating

art except it appears that the creative aesthetic experience may be even more powerful for the artist. The artist often loses track of space and time, focusing only on the work itself; again, this state is part of the definition of aesthetic experience.

It thus seems that both the nature of the experience of doing art, and the tenuous position of art in our society, have been limitations to most serious critical inquiry in arts education. I have wondered if, in not looking more critically at what aspects of arts education might be limiting or problematic, we might be contributing to the very insignificance we deplore. By not exploring the possible dangers of arts education, we imply that no skill or sensitivity is involved in teaching it, and that any form of arts activity is educationally valuable. Even more important, this lack of critical consciousness may easily hamper development within arts education, trivializing what we indeed have to offer education.

I will not attempt at this point a critical review of all theory and practice in arts education. Rather, I wish to focus my comments on a structure within which such criticism may be meaningful and productive. This structure is the concept of "fit" between arts and education. I wish to suggest that a major reason the arts have remained trivial in education is that we have attempted to fit the arts into existing values and practices of contemporary schooling.

In everyday use, our determination of whether or not something fits is ordinarily based upon a mechanical

understanding of the concept. In this understanding, we look for fit by asking such questions as

Is there a place for it?

Is it the right size?

In other words, we do not question the overall structure of the larger whole into which the smaller part will fit; we look for a space the right size and shape, and expect to make only minor adjustments at best in the larger structure. Another characteristic of mechanical fit is its goal of efficiency of production; as long as the machine works for its intended purpose, we need not examine its parts.

It is in this sense that we seem to be trying to fit the arts into schools. Children do tire from intensive academic instruction, and recreational activities are necessary if they are to be renewed for more--here is a place the arts can fit. Schools are expected to prepare students for careers--and there are career opportunities in the arts; here is another place the arts can fit. Children can learn cognitive skills and concepts through movement, drawing, acting out, and other activities in the arts--here is another place the arts can fit. Other ways that the arts can fit include:

Development of the feeling aspect of the self (which is ignored in most other subject areas), thus making for a whole child;

Improving discipline;

Making school more enjoyable (which helps in increasing attendance and reducing dropouts);

Development of understanding of other cultures.

These, indeed, are ways that the arts do fit into schools. And it is difficult to question these goals or the effectiveness of the arts to accomplish them. However, there seem to be two major problems when the arts achieve this kind of fit--one is what happens to the arts and the other, which is related, is what does not happen in schooling.

In my own state of North Carolina, where the arts are mandated as part of the curriculum, they seem practically invisible in the state's program guide and competency goals and indicators. Just as we may cut off the end of a too long screw to make it fit into a machine, we conveniently trim off parts of the arts that do not fit--those goals that do not fit into outline form, those objectives that cannot be worded in behavioral terms, those activities that will not fit into a 25-minute slot twice a week for six weeks. The machine of schooling turns out the same basic product, with only an additional component of arts education--admittedly small--attached. It is rather like trying to cover up a flawed manufacturing process by adding a little glitter to the final product.

If we use the arts to relieve the tedium of schooling, as a reward or a break or an incentive for attendance, we may turn the arts into a means of temporary escape from a difficult and unpleasant reality, a moment of anesthesia that allows us to tolerate that which we ought not tolerate.

If the curriculum is dehumanizing, we should change it rather than use the arts to make it more bearable and to get students to attend school in spite of it. Otherwise, we are teaching students that the arts are a way to avoid being touched by the problems of the everyday world. problems which they should avoid rather than confront.

In addition, this orientation may all too easily emphasize only those dimensions of the arts that are "easy" and "fun." Significant art does not deal merely with pictures of hearts and flowers, with plays and dances and songs about happy feelings; it deals also with what is difficult, ugly, and fearful. Further, it takes as much energy and concentration to do significant art as to do important work in other areas. If we emphasize arts experiences that are merely pleasant and relaxing, we are contributing to their lack of significance in people's lives.

Lying hidden in each of the ways the arts fit into schools are similar problems worth examining. If we regard arts in education as career preparation, we may easily ignore students who do not have potential for such a career. If we rely on the arts to provide the feeling dimension in education, we may be reinforcing the mind-body-spirit split, with feeling becoming relegated to the arts instead of being acknowledged as a dimension of all knowing, and we may ignore the valuable cognitive dimension of the arts.

An emphasis on improved discipline may lead to instructional methodologies which foster student passivity. The

arts, just as any other area of the curriculum, may be a place where teachers encourage doing what one is told more than thinking for oneself, staying in the lines more than expanding the boundaries. Ideally the arts improve discipline by helping students understand what it feels like to attend and concentrate, and recognize the satisfaction of using self-discipline to create something worthwhile. But it becomes harder to see this depth and detail of discipline as long as the machine of schooling is working efficiently.

Another admirable goal involves use of the arts to help students come to understand different people, cultures, and the world around us. I strongly believe in the capacity of the arts to do this. However, when we become concerned about mechanical fit and efficiency of production, it is far too easy to make arts experiences merely another item on a check-sheet of objectives or assignments. I wonder if it may be worse to have students, for example, think they understand African culture because they have learned one dance and made peanut stew, than it is to recognize their ignorance of a rich culture.

None of these problems, of course, is beyond the reach of skilled and sensitive teachers. But in order to develop these skills and sensitivities, we must look beyond the goal of achieving a mechanical fit between the arts and schools.

As discussed earlier, Eisner proposed that a stronger justification for arts in education is not based upon needs

of society that can be accomplished by other activities as well, but rather is based upon the essential nature of art itself. I share Eisner's view that we must start our thinking about art education not by looking to what society needs, but by looking at what art is. However, I choose this view not because it makes a stronger case for arts education (which it does), but because I think the other choice not only trivializes art education, but also reinforces dimensions of schooling that ought to be changed rather than tolerated. Even though the starting place for arts educators should be the nature of art itself, we must not ignore the relationship of arts education to schooling and of art itself to the larger society. As artists we must be concerned with art itself, and hold it truly to what it is, in its greatest significance. As arts <u>educators</u>, we must also be concerned with the social context of the arts and arts education. As I will indicate, I do not find these to be conflicting positions.

Let us start, then, with the starting place--the nature of art. It is surely a central question in the preparation of arts educators, and is not one to be easily or quickly answered. Rather, it is worth pondering throughout one's career as an arts educator, based upon one's own experience of art as well as the literature.

One important dimension of this question has to do with whether we focus upon art as a product or as an experience. If we look to the art product to understand the essential

nature of art, we are primarily concerned with recognizing the aesthetic qualities to be found within the art object--grace, wit, or expansiveness, for example. Redfern (1983) refers to this as the "objectivist" view. Such a view may enhance our consciousness, but only, I think, our consciousness of art. There is nothing to indicate that it will ever move beyond itself. I find it significant that Eisner defines the contributions of a subject centered approach to art in much larger terms than only making and understanding art works. Rather, he indicates that the art experience will contribute to a particular way of living in and responding to the world--a way characterized by vision, consciousness, and sensitivity. In other words, if we focus on the experience of doing art, we may see that its essential nature includes not just transformation of art materials, but transformation of persons.

However, we must recognize that the experience of art is not uniform. Hirschman (1983) noted three different kinds of experiences which may arise in various activities commonly deemed to be aesthetic. These activities included both performance (playing or singing music, dancing) and observation (of movies, plays, concerts, and dance performances, as well as reading a novel or story). The three types of experience she looked for were aesthetic experience (deep involvement in the experience), escapist experience (helping one to escape problems, pressures, or unpleasantness), and agentic experience (analytic interest in its development); she found all three forms

of experience among the different activities, although different activities were more likely to result in certain experiences than others.

As I indicated earlier, I have some difficulty with the use of the arts to escape unpleasantness. I acknowledge that the arts may offer us an alternative reality far more pleasant than the everyday, and that such a reality may be a significant source of nourishment and knowledge of possibilities. As Marcuse (1978) has noted, a journey to the transcendent dimension may put us in touch with our inner resources--passion, imagination, conscience. And then, because the arts exist also in the everyday world, the aesthetic experience may return us able to see more clearly, feel more deeply, respond more sensitively. However, if the focus of the arts experience is escaping from unpleasantness, I question whether it enhances our consciousness of the everyday world. The transcendent experience itself is so satisfying that, instead of returning us to the world with renewed sensitivity and vision, it may all too easily seduce us into believing that the imaginative world is all that there is, or all that matters. I find this just as problematic as the belief that the here and now is the only possible reality.

There are other ways, too, that the arts experience may diminish our consciousness. It is easy to think of the many instances in which art has been used for propaganda, or to so stir groups of people emotionally that they lose their sense of individual responsibility for their own actions. Further, as

Berger (1973) points out, art does not present the truth, but rather a particular way of looking at the world, a particular view of reality. If we look to artists (and art critics) as authorities, which we often do, we may fail to recognize our right to interpret our own reality; art thus becomes a route to loss of consciousness.

Thus it seems that we must take care in generalizing the nature of the arts experience. The arts may be a unique way of understanding the world, giving us a fresh vision, activating our sensibilities and capacity to respond, but they may also be a way to escape from the world, pleasing us simply because of what they take us away from, and making us more able to tolerate that which we ought instead try to change. The arts may also dull our senses, or anesthetize us to our responsibilities as persons in the world. Simply presenting the arts--as an activity for creating, performing, or observing--may well not provide the very significant contributions indicated by Eisner and others. If arts education is to accomplish the kind of relationship with the world that the essentialist position proposes, then we must look with a very discriminating eye at the arts curriculum, being aware of both its dangers and its possibilities.

Greene (1978) proposes that some art works are more likely than others to enhance consciousness of what it means to be a person in the world. She notes that certain works of art are considered great because of their capacity to bring us into conscious engagement with the world, into self

reflectiveness and critical awareness, and to a sense of moral agency, and that these works of art ought to be central in curriculum. This indicates that selection of content is a critical issue facing arts educators.

I must be clear at this point that I am not proposing censorship or manipulation of students to attempt to be sure that they have only the kind of experience through the arts that we wish them to have. As Rader and Jessup (1976) note, some aesthetic experiences may touch our lives deeply, and others may have scarcely any personal or practical reference. Both are a part of art. We cannot control the arts experience for students, nor should we attempt to. However, we can and should become aware of our own values, and be sure that we do not allow those most significant dimensions of the arts experience to be buried or ignored through lack of our own awareness, or through an attempt to fit into schools. We can also raise the critical faculties of students, to help them become aware that the arts may be a means of enhancing their consciousness or dulling it, and that the arts can be used to manipulate or deceive us just as they may help us become more sensitive and responsive.

In other words, I do not find questions about the nature of the arts experience to be disassociated from questions regarding its social and moral context. Both, I think, rest upon common ground--on our vision of what it is to be human, and how we might live in the world. It is the search for

vision and the attempt to give it form that seem to have fueled both the most significant art known to humankind and the most significant moral thinking and social endeavors. It is this search that takes us inside ourselves--to imagination, passion, and conscience--and beyond ourselves--to discover our connection with other forms and other life. It is not that arts education should lead to moral behavior, but that the root of both ought to be the same. If such a root--the search for what it is to be a person in the world--were central in education--we might well expect a flowering of both moral action and meaningful artistic expression.

And, while I do not view art as an agent for moral instruction and social change, we must be aware that, whether we like it or not, art still bears a relationship to society. Not to be aware of the relationship means that we give up our power to choose what the relationship might be. Arts education may be in a relationship of tacit support for the status quo, or one concerned with possibilities of <u>what might be</u>. It may lead persons to see only their power to create images on paper or movement on a stage. Or it may help them see connections with their lives as persons in the world--that imagination, creation, and transformation may be extended beyond the boundaries of classrooms, studios, and theatres.

This implies that arts educators must become aware of their own vision, must examine questions of their own humanness and their relationship with others with whom they share

the world. Those who wish to teach must study not only their content area, human development, and educational psychology. They must also study themselves, reflect upon who they are as persons, define and redefine their values in dialogue with other voices.

It also implies that the arts curriculum should consist not only of creating, performing, and observing art. It must also include opportunities for reflection, for expanding consciousness beyond oneself and one's art into the larger world of which both are a part.

I cannot suggest such guidelines for curriculum and teacher preparation without acknowledging that they make the arts less likely to fit into contemporary schooling. When artistic vision is not conveniently contained in the room at the end of the hall, when it is concerned more with transformation than adjustment, arts education may lead to questioning of the assumptions and values of schooling. Instead of fitting into schools, the arts may reveal and illuminate; new forms of schooling, and new forms of art, may be created in the process. To be willing to view arts education in this way means that arts educators must also be willing to deal with concerns far beyond the arts curriculum and the personal satisfaction of doing and perceiving art. To resist such thinking means that arts education is likely to remain a trivial ornament in education.

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